

Don Chelf

This article is written by Jeffrey J. Miller

Don Chelf was an original Buffalo Bill, playing for the team during its two-year silver-and-blue era of 1960-61. A native of West Liberty, Iowa, Chelf played his college ball at the University of Iowa during its revival under Forest Evashevski, who had taken over the school's football program in 1952. In Chelf's final game as a collegian, the underdog Hawkeyes tied mighty Notre Dame, 14-14, to cap a 5-3-1 season. Chelf was a standout at guard, earning trips to the East-West Shrine game and the Senior Bowl, the two most prestigious postseason college all-star games at the time.



Chelf was selected by the Baltimore Colts in the 12th round of the 1954 NFL Draft, but put his pro career on hold while he served a hitch in the United States Air Force. "I went into the service for two years," Chelf recalled. "I was in Washington, DC, and I played there. We had thirteen pros on the team. As a matter of fact, Tommy O'Connell and Ernie Warlick were on the team. We had an undefeated team; it was a pretty good team."

He was 27 when he finally reported to the Colts in 1958. "When I went to the Colts camp," said Chelf, "I was one of the smallest linemen there. I didn't know whether I was going to make it. Then a job opened up at North Dakota State, and Bucky O'Connor called and wanted to know if I was interested in going up there, and I told him I was. I



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told Weeb Ewbank, the coach at Baltimore that year, I was going to take a college coaching job rather than take a chance on playing with the Colts. So, I went up there for a year, then I went back to Iowa and got my Master's, and then I went to the University of New Mexico.

While at New Mexico, Chelf served under an up-and-coming coach who might be more familiar to Bills fans as the man who later led the team to four straight Super Bowls. "In 1958 and '59, I was coaching at New Mexico with Marv Levy," Chelf remembered proudly. "We had a couple of winning seasons. Don Perkins played on the team." After the 1959 season, Levy left for a position with the University of California. Chelf was beginning to feel the itch to lace them up again and started making inquiries about the new pro league being formed to compete with the established NFL. "It was a last-minute situation. I was back home in Iowa, and Buster Ramsey had coached Detroit the year before, and one of the assistant Iowa coaches, who later became head coach for the Minnesota Vikings, was a friend of Buster's because he had been in Detroit when Buster was coaching there. I went up to Iowa and asked him if anybody had any contacts in the new AFL, and he knew Buster. He called Buster, and Buster told me to be there two days later because we were starting practice. It was a real quick thing."

Chelf later recalled the revolving door through which literally hundreds of grid prospects came and went during that first season of the Buffalo Bills: "There were people coming and going all of the time. They would say they had a team on the field, one coming and one going."

With no one's job secure and feeling that his lack of girth might hurt his chances at a permanent roster spot, Chelf found a creative way to maintain his regular playing weight.

"I went in at about 230 pounds," he recalled. "I was one of the smallest linemen in camp. After we'd practiced for a week, I got down to 217 pounds. I wasn't going to do any drinking, I was going to get in shape, the whole thing, and I jumped on the scale and jumped off quick before anybody saw it. I said to Tommy O'Connell, 'We got to go get a beer or two, I'm down to 217 pounds!' So, we started having a couple of beers after practice each night, and I went back up to 230 and stayed for the rest of the year." Chelf's "sacrifice" paid off as he earned the starting ---- guard position, which he maintained for the team's entire inaugural season.

Besides football and teaching, Chelf and two other original Bills, quarterbacks Tommy O'Connell and Richie Lucas, opened a men's clothing store on Main Street in Buffalo,



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near the University at Buffalo Campus, called ‘Connell, Lucas and Chelf. “We started that as soon as we got there,” he said. “We had that clothing store open by Christmas of that first year. We got right into it, Tommy, Richie Lucas and I.” When asked why his was listed last, Chelf joked, “I was a lineman, the other two were quarterbacks. The store, under different ownership, remains in business under the truncated name of O’Connell’s.

He returned in 1961, but that was the year the team drafted linemen Al Bemiller, Ken Rice, and future Hall-of-Fame guard Billy Shaw. Guard Tom Day, whom the team had drafted the year before, finally joined the team as well. Chelf found himself relegated to spot duty.

After that second year, Chelf and the Bills agreed to a mutual—though amicable—parting of ways. “I was 31 years old and I was having trouble running,” he remembered. “I had swelling on both knees, and (Bills line coach) Bob Dove told me they didn’t think they were going to bring me back for the next year. I had suspected that.”

Chelf was ready to move on to the next phase of his life. “I went out to California and started working with Oscar Mayer as a salesman in Long Beach and Los Angeles. Then Denver called me and wanted me to come back and try out, and once you’ve played you always think you can do it. Even though I couldn’t run, my knees would swell up and my elbows would swell up, I agreed to come back and try out for them. I left California and went to Denver for the tryout, and my knees were so bad that I couldn’t run. I was there a week and we talked it over and thought it’d be best that I called it a day.”

He left Colorado and returned to Western New York and became a high school teacher and football coach. “In the beginning, I coached at Bennett, and we had pretty good teams there, but then I left and went back to the University of New Mexico, and later became a stockbroker. But then the market went bad and I decided that that wasn’t for me—I didn’t like losing money for other people—so I left there and went back to Buffalo and started teaching there again. Coaching with Art Suratti over at Grover, we had a pretty good team for four years, and then I went to McKinley. They had had pretty bad teams for quite some time, and we won three times out of the last four years I was there.” Chelf remained at McKinley for almost 30 years before retiring in the late 1990s. He was inducted into the Harvard Cup (Buffalo City Schools) Hall of Fame in 2003.

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Chelf was living in in Tampa, Florida, when he passed away on July 16, 2019, after a six-month battle with lung cancer. He was 86. Chelf was survived by his wife, Suzanne, two grown children and four grandchildren.

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